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ABSTRACT

An advocate of the Natural Approach to second language instruction discusses problems associated with error correction, highlighted in her personal experience when she visited Italy to explore her heritage and use her Italian language skills. After requesting to have her errors corrected by a native-speaking friend, the visitor experienced great frustration, then diminished self-esteem about communicating in the second language. Underlying thoughts and expectations are then examined and their implications for classroom second language error correction are discussed. Beliefs and thoughts explored include the following: "I'm Italian-American; I should be able to speak Italian"; "I don't care that there are four levels of acquisition; I want to skip the first three"; "I want to be as loquacious in Italian as in my first language"; "I don't want to embarrass my friend"; and "I don't speak Italian as well as my friend speaks English." It is concluded that while error correction should not be eliminated, the language teacher should first spend time learning the feelings and expectations of the students in order to anticipate counterproductive responses to correction. Several techniques for classroom use are discussed, drawing on recent research. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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Correct Me To Tears: The Importance of *Knowing* the Learner Before Correcting Errors

by Angela Parrino

When I visited Sicily three years ago, I traded my role of professor for that of learner. An invitation from a former student provided the perfect opportunity for me to brush up on my rusty Italian as I explored my heritage. This 12 day experience also offered me a chance to examine the effect of error correction on my language performance in a natural, acquisition-oriented setting as opposed to a classroom learning-focused environment. This graduate professor turned-participant observer agreed to have her former student turned-friend and teacher correct every language error she made, without giving much conscious thought to the intense personal reactions that would follow.

An advocate of the Natural Approach that focuses initially on fluency rather than accuracy (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), or so I thought, it would have seemed more appropriate for me to have requested not to be corrected during my brief stay or only when I committed an error for which I was totally misunderstood. At home, I had discussed the deleterious effects of overcorrection on performance with students and colleagues. Even though we concluded that not all anxiety was debilitating (Bailey, 1979), we also agreed a la` Ellis (1990), that only global errors impeding understanding warranted immediate attention. Those of a more local nature, those that fell less harshly on the native speaker's ears, should be temporarily "tolerated". This treatment of errors would allow a student to communicate more freely. But when my friend

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asked whether or not I wanted to be corrected (She did politely ask!), I did not reflect on any of the above-mentioned facts or on any other theories of acquiring/learning a second language for that matter. My non-academic self blurted out: "Don't worry". "Correct me all you want". And that is exactly what she did. As she corrected ad infinitum, my affective filter rose higher and higher. By the fourth night I was brought to tears, standing on the cliffs of Taormina, trying to explain to my friend how I felt, how a second language learner feels, when she cannot fluently and effectively speak in a language that is not her own.

So, if what I really believed in was selective correcting, why had I not said so, especially considering my anticipated brief stay in the country? Was there a disparity in our definitions of correcting? What conditions mitigated against lowering my anxiety level once correcting became a part of our daily routines? What were my unspoken expectations about my language performance that intensified the effect of being corrected? Why was I not able to divorce myself from my friend's comments and feel good about what I was able to say in Italian instead of feeling badly about what I could not say?

Based on my knowledge of language learning and teaching and my friend's good intentions, I felt I *should* have been able to control my reactions. How many students feel this same sense of frustration and inability to lower their anxiety, to control their reactions, so as to improve performance? What are their families', employers' and their own expectations of their performance? How

aware are students of these issues? More importantly, how often do we as teachers consider who our students are in our error correction practices?

With the desire to find answers to these questions, I have analyzed my own particular experience. I have chosen to examine and share the underlying thoughts and expectations I entertained about myself, my Italian proficiency and heritage and the people with whom I interacted. This information is the kind that teachers are not always privy to nor prone to ask about. Nonetheless, such information is critical to realizing effective teacher correction practices. Although what I discovered is specific to my personal encounter, implications can be gleaned from it regarding the importance of knowing your students', and their "running mental tapes" to facilitate the task of correcting errors and learners' acquisition.

I *I'm Italian-American. I should be able to speak Italian.*

Despite the fact that I was raised speaking English, I have had the nagging feeling that I *should* be able to speak Italian. I was born and raised in an Italian-American community and often heard Italian (Neopolitan and Sicilian dialects) spoken in the streets and local stores. During visits with my grandmothers, my parents spoke with them, kept secrets from us, and occasionally swore in Italian. My mother told me that when people asked my nationality I should say that I was American of Italian descent. Somehow, though, I always answered that I was Italian; a hyphenated identity just did not satisfy me. Not like it did my mother, a

first generation American, who identified more with the "American" portion of our mutually hyphenated "Italian-American" identity. Perhaps, this was an act of rebellion against her father who forced her to sit as a girl with her siblings through Italian classes he gave nightly. Although she learned to use her family's dialect, becoming literate in it, she vowed never to subject her children to learn Italian. My grandfather got the last laugh, though. His beliefs took root in me, the grandchild he never met, who enjoyed studying Italian in school, going to Italian mass on Sundays, and who bought Italian newspapers and magazines.

But in Sicily, I was American. Although I was very welcomed by my friend's circle of family and friends, I was the professor from "L'America". I was perceived as different, despite my familiarity with many of the customs I experienced during my stay, and my friend's mentioning at every gathering that my grandparents hailed from Sicily and Naples. I had hoped that the cultural distance that I perceived between us would be bridged by language, however, my level of language did not allow me to engage in Italian the way I had envisioned in order to do so.

II *I'm somewhat of a perfectionist. I don't care if there are four levels of language acquisition. I want to skip the first three and jump to the fourth.*

I wanted to fit myself into the category of intermediate fluent Italian speaker; the level of early production was not good enough for me. I wanted to be able to speak with complex sentence structures, instead of simple subject-verb-object arrangements. Why couldn't coordinating conjunctions roll off my tongue with ease so that noone would suspect my difficulty in linking clauses? I

wanted to conjugate verb tenses without furrowing my brow as I attempted to visualize the listing of verb endings from my most recent Italian textbook. I had been fairly accurate at fill-in the blank tasks at home in the class I was auditing. Noone would know that from my language performance in Sicily. I wanted to have ***already*** acquired even though I was ***only*** in the process of. Could I really be over the language learning hill? I wouldn't allow implications of the critical age hypothesis dampen my determination to attain my goal (Lenneberg, 1967; Seliger, 1978). With high expectations, I read recent brain research indicating that hemispheric lateralization wasn't necessarily the end of language acquisition. The notion that language is located across brain hemsipheres, connected by convergence zones, comforted me (Blakeslee, 1991). I wanted my neurons to dance the lambada instead of an arms-distanced waltz in this my third language as they did in my first. I even would have been satisfied if they imitated their behavior in my second language. But no, they were intent on exposing me for the Italian speaker I really was - a dead ringer for early production!

III *I'm loquacious. I'm frustrated when I can't be in my second language what I am in my first.*

Put simply, I enjoy talking. And if a talker is silenced, she feels anxious. Perhaps it's some sort of discourse addiction. I remember feeling the anxiety associated with language shock (Brown, 1987) when I arrived in Medellin, Colombia to student teach for five months in 1976. At first, I felt uncomfortable because I could not get my ideas across as quickly as I personally needed,

with a processing time I felt accustomed to in my first language. The woman in whose home I lived assured me that I would soon be talking as fast as a train, the equivalent to the endearing "motormouth" I was often referred to as a child. I began to feel better as time passed, even talking in Spanish in my dreams.

But this situation was different from the one in Sicily in significant ways. I was exposed daily to Spanish in Colombia for over a period of five months. Preceding the time spent there were eight years of training that provided a strong foundation from which to speak. It seems that the amount of exposure and consistency of instruction were key to perfecting my ability to "rattle" on.

To this day, my Italian training has not been as thorough or as consistent. Aside from the "din" of Italian dialectal rhythms I have heard all my life (Krashen, 1983), and a certain degree of transfer of comprehension from having studied another romance language, I have had only one year of formal study in Italian 18 years ago before my recent trip. This was followed by a 15 day vacation to Italy six years ago, and sporadic auditing of Italian grammar classes for the past two academic years at the institution in which I teach. My native Italian-speaking friends at home continue to speak to me in English the language in which we met and communicate most efficiently. In sum, my exposure to Italian has been inconsistent; my output is proof. A bookmark I once had quoted Oscar Wilde to have said that "consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative". Well, maybe not in everything, but

consistent practice surely helps in acquiring language. This was as obvious to me before I left for Sicily as I thought it was while I was there. But my desire to speak fluently was deaf to logic!

IV *I'm a professor now with an image to maintain. I can't be caught making silly errors.*

I carry out the role of associate tenured professor in the graduate program in which I teach. Our behavior in a role is critical to establishing and maintaining our situations (Goffman, 1959). I hadn't thought about the relationship of my professorial rank and my role as learner before my trip and the effect it would have on my performance. Eventually, it occurred to me that the person who so kindly opened her doors to me had been *my* student when we last met. She had taken a two-week intensive methodology course with me in the 1992 TESOL Summer Institute held in Bratislava, Slovakia. In the spirit of whole language philosophy, I had believed that as a professor I was both learner and teacher. A more traditional view in Sicily enveloped me, though, making it impossible for me to function comfortably in my dual status. I was no longer teacher, just learner. I had switched roles and felt naked in my teacher's eyes. With this realization, came an increase in conscious attention to my language production. I placed unreasonable demands on myself, the professor; I wasn't allowed to make errors. Although committing errors is currently looked upon favorably as the means of improving one's interlanguage (Ellis, 1990), for me they were somehow linked to professional inadequacy, although they had nothing to do with the content or quality of my scholastic presentations.

V *My friend's friends were professional people. I didn't want to embarrass her or bore them.*

At times, many of us are guilty of worrying more about how others feel than how we do. Current self-help books would call us "co-dependents" (Beattie, 1990) I guess that worrying about how your second language proficiency effects others might make you "language co-dependent". It is suggested in such books that our needs should come first so as to achieve our highest good. Honestly, though, this was not easy to accomplish in Sicily. Each response I made was a laborious task. I kept feeling that I was ruining our great time, as I interspersed my clumsy sentences in with their idiomatic, high speed talk. In fairness to my friend and her ex-patriate British friends, they had accepted my constructions with not so much as a frown. They smiled, encouraging me to speak. They spoke alot of English to me when we were alone, without the Italian friends. But it was about some of the Italian friends that I wondered. I understood that several had studied English, yet, they would not practice with me. Even one who was leaving for England on vacation, would not speak English in my presence. Some time after, I reasoned that they might be feeling in English what I was feeling in Italian, embarrassed to make an error in the company of their friend's English-speaking professor. Such thoughts did not pacify me, though. I wanted my cake and to eat it as well. I wanted to perfect my Italian, but be accommodated in English. Anxiety was wreaking havoc on my mind.

VI *My friend spoke impeccable English. I couldn't pacify myself with the thought that her English wasn't perfect.*

Practice makes perfect, that is, appropriate practice which

aims at providing the learner with language input that is only slightly beyond her level. I received plenty of input, but it felt at times like i + 10, instead of i+1! My friend had lived in England for several years with her former British husband and two children. The balanced bilingual mom, who also had a degree of fluency in French, had raised two beautifully, balanced bilingual sons. She was trained in the classics and was able to read some Latin and Greek. Her language abilities were testimony that her language acquisition device had never atrophied; a la Zobl, it triggered at will (Ellis, 1985)! I fought against envy and tried to take pride in my ability to speak Spanish and to have studied a little Portuguese a long time ago. I spoke Italian well with bus drivers and shop people; with strangers, I was confident. They had no expectations of me so my Italian seemed to flow more easily with them than when I spoke with my friend whose opinion I valued.

What does it all mean?

Some time has now passed since what turned out ultimately to be a productive and enjoyable trip to Sicily. Despite the anxiety I suffered when my Italian performance fell short of my expectations, I learned alot as language learner that continues to inform the teacher in me about error correction and, perhaps, in you as well.

Certainly the errors I committed and those I continue to commit when speaking Italian, can be attributed to L1 interference, transfer and an inadequate, incomplete and erroneous second

language knowledge. However, this is only part of the picture. It is, in my opinion, a very "soulless" explanation (Moore, 1992). That is, reducing errors merely to issues of competence and performance diminishes that which is human in language, in general, and unique to a particular learner. And although such notions as situational and free variation and systematic and non-systematic variability (Ellis, 1985) intimate the effect of who the learner is on performance, they do not do enough justice to the notion that *the errors are the learner* - past, present and future. If we as teachers want to know how to determine when and how to correct, we would find it in our best interest to spend the first few weeks of a course getting to know what our students thoughts and feelings and expectations for themselves. Although this advice is applicable to learners of all ages, it would seem to be even more appropriate for the adolescent and adult learner who may have more urgent needs placed on them in the second language because of their age. Issues of ego-permeability and risk taking (Brown, 1987) may figure more significantly among these learners, requiring greater sensitivity on the part of the teacher.

I am not proposing, however, that error correction be eliminated. Error correction, in itself, is not taboo. Oller, cited in Klein (1986), makes the case for appropriate affective and cognitive feedback to affect a positive change in one's interlanguage and as a preventative measure against fossilization. If the second language learner gets a message that the native speaker to whom she is speaking likes what she says (affective) and

understands what she says (cognitive), then she has the green light to continue speaking. But when the L2 speaker is incorrect, such a message will not help to improve the learner's proficiency, perhaps even contribute to permanently embedding errors. Although it is true that not all second language learners optimally monitor their production and attend to corrections, many do, and seek out assistance. Since developing metalinguistic awareness is the first step on the road to developing native-like metalinguistic ability, teachers have an obligation to assist students in this endeavor. Error correction is part of this process.

Error correction, however, has no set prescription; suggestions vary (Omaggio Hadley, 1994). We must know our students more completely before we correct, for we are not just correcting an error. We are correcting a particular second language speaker making an error. And the unique mix of her personality, age, social status and the attitudes and motivation for speaking a second language will surely impact on performance (Skehan, 1989). Extrapolating from this information we can try to determine whether particular learners would prefer to be corrected in private, openly or in written form. A learner's style and personality type might necessitate a more or less explicit indication by the teacher that an error was made. Students and teacher may agree on uninterrupted speaking with error correction to follow for language activities focusing on fluency, for example, but more immediate error correcting in situations focusing on accuracy.

It appears to me that we might better assess our students'

needs by determining their frustration levels to correction. In my experience, I believe that my friend actually corrected somewhat less, whether consciously or not, when she sensed my growing tension. Lowering the affective filter, then, becomes a matter of really getting to know who our students are rather than who we think they are. We can accomplish this by writing down our observations in journals, facilitating group work and making our students active participants in their own learning, asking them to share with us what works best for them in journals of their own. This inquiry may also take on the form of a checklist, survey, interview or responses to case scenarios carried out privately or in small groups. In addition, teachers may audio and videotape classes, honing skills of descriptive and reflective observation of their correction practices and their students' responses to them.

Of course, students may feel uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with a teacher and teachers may feel limited by time constraints to cover course content so that becoming more thoroughly acquainted with their students appears to be a luxury they cannot afford. My intuition tells me, though, that it's worth the effort. In the name of humanistic pedagogy and facilitating L2 proficiency, *knowing* the learner may just help eliminate correcting to tears.

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